Laforgue, Beauvoir, and the Second Sex

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On 18 October 1926, an eighteen-year-old student, Simone de Beauvoir, took the bus across Paris to attend an uninspiring Greek language class. On this particular journey, she passed the time by reading – not the works of philosophy in which this model student was beginning to immerse herself, but rather poetry. That night she noted in her diary: 'Lu du Laforgue. Intense émotion. Jamais rien rencontré d'aussi profondément déchirant' (2008: 134). Beauvoir's encounter with Laforgue's verse produced in her 'un universel attendrissement' (2008: 150) that was hard to contain. Indeed, she later registered surprise at her capacity to cry over his poems as she lingered awkwardly by the *bouquinistes* on the Seine (2008: 189).[1] Laforgue's characteristic pessimism seemed to chime with Beauvoir's persistent melancholy that autumn. 'Oh! la vie est trop triste, incurablement triste…' was one of the many lines of Laforgue's verse that she copied out in her diary and read back to herself ('Soir de carnaval'; cited by Beauvoir, 2008: 132). Beauvoir was in love – or, at least, contemplating being in love – with her well-to-do nineteen-year-old cousin Jacques; and it is largely in connection with her fraught reflections on this relationship, and in particular on the prospect of marriage, that Laforgue's verse is cited, his own rendering of the female lover's discourse providing Beauvoir with the language in which to voice her own tentatively amorous sentiment: 'Ces mots qu'Elle lui dit, je les ai dits moi aussi, […] il y a des jours où j'ai dit exactement ces mots-là' (2008: 175).

Laforgue seemed to capture something of the young student's emotional turmoil in those months before her first encounter with Sartre and, eventually, the lifelong relationship that would render her uncertain feelings for Jacques something of a sentimental *fausse piste*.

Curiously, Sartre too was prone to react emotionally to Laforgue and later recalled shedding 'des torrents de larmes' on rereading his verse (Bertholet, 2000: 84). Capable of reducing both individuals to tears, we might wonder why Laforgue's writing exerted such a pull both on the imagination and on the heartstrings of the existentialist intellectual.[2] Before we rush to explain away Beauvoir's deeply affective response to Laforgue's poetry as the manifestation of adolescent angst, we might recall that it is the poet's assessment of gender relations that, some twenty-three years later, Beauvoir would cite at the head of her conclusion to the second volume of *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949), having already invoked Laforgue – his notes, novellas, and verse – at earlier junctures (1976, I: 306-07, 405-06). It is the nature of these references to Laforgue that I wish to reflect on in this article, with a view to reexamining the poet's writing on women. In returning to Laforgue's poetry and notes via Beauvoir – that is, via both her intimate first reading and her later handling of his thought in her feminist philosophy – I want to explore the irony and the ideals that underpinned his account of sexual difference, and which have together rendered the poet something of a contradiction in terms in much critical discourse: while Clive Scott describes Laforgue as 'intermittently sexist' (1990: 235), for Mireille Dottin-Orsini, Laforgue's admixture of contempt and compassion towards women make of him a 'misogyne féministe' (Dottin-Orsini, in Laforgue, 1986-2000, III: 1073; hereafter *OC*).

Beauvoir makes numerous, often extensive, allusions to a range of nineteenth-century literature over the two volumes of *Le Deuxième Sexe*, including many women authors (such as Staël, Stern, Tristan, Sand, Bashkirtseff). But from her cast of male writers, it is Stendhal who stands out, as the subject of an individual essay, 'Stendhal ou le romanesque du vrai'. Stendhal represents, as Maria Scott puts it, 'an exception to the rule' among male authors insofar as 'his heroines depart from the usual myths of femininity by resembling flesh-and-blood women' (2013: 1-2). According to Beauvoir, this 'tendre ami des femmes' (1976, I:

377) depicted woman as a subject in her own right, and rejected precisely the sort of essentialism, or 'l'Éternel Féminin', to which Laforgue insistently, though not uncritically, returned ('Notre petite compagne', *Des Fleurs de bonne volonté*; partially cited by Beauvoir, 1976, I: 306). Unlike Stendhal, Laforgue's sympathies are harder to discern, his self-caricature as a 'bon misogyne' ('Préludes autobiographiques', *Les Complaintes*; l. 16, *OC*, I: 546-49) already signalling the sorts of paradoxes at work in his diagnosis of the female condition. But if the Laforguian female hardly provides Beauvoir with a positive touchstone, the poet's (often caustic) account of the mystification of femininity is nevertheless harnessed to the ends of her own arguments. Beauvoir's scattered allusions to Laforgue in her founding text of post-war French feminism are my starting point in this article for gauging the ways in which the poet's diagnosis of the female condition might be reread. Just as this diagnosis was already rooted in many of the concerns, and terms, central to Beauvoir's account, it was also underwritten by more radical ideals than it might appear, not least his call for fraternal relations between the sexes, which, as we shall see, was to capture Beauvoir's imagination.

Love, Sex, and Bad Faith

Any approach to Laforgue's writing on women has necessarily to pick its way through those strains of German pessimist philosophy with which his verse and notes are coloured. While Laforgue almost certainly never read Schopenhauer's magnum opus, *World as Will and Representation* – the full French translation only appearing in 1886, and then in an edition of limited availability – he did have recourse to a range of secondary accounts of his philosophy, which had begun to appear in the 1870s, as well as to Eduard von Hartmann's *Philosophie de l'Inconscient* (1869; and translated into French in 1877), which Laforgue read in the winter of

1880-81, and which would prove a continuous reference point for the poet in the years that followed.[3] It is possible that Laforgue directly encountered Schopenhauer's essay 'On Women' (1851) and his chapter on 'The Metaphysics of Sexual Love' (in the second volume of the 1844 expanded edition of *World as Will and Representation*) via Jean Bourdeau's popular collection of translated extracts *Pensées et fragments*, which was first published in 1881.[4] But the thrust of Schopenhauer's writing on women would, in any case, have been apparent from secondary sources, not least Hartmann's own engagement with the 'Metaphysics of Sexual Love' in his chapter, 'L'Inconscient dans l'amour des sexes'.[5] In his essay 'On Women', in particular, Schopenhauer voiced his outright misogyny with such venom that one imagines he had a particular axe to grind: in an emphatic statement of subordination that Beauvoir surely had in mind, these 'thorough and incurable philistines' are 'the inferior second sex in *every* respect' (1970: 86).[6] Not only have these 'stunted, narrow-shouldered, broad-hipped' beings been wrongly designated the 'fair sex' (1970: 85), any beauty and charm to which women can lay claim are simply what he calls the 'weapons she needs for securing her existence' (1970: 81). As the very seat of the Will, woman finds her entire vocation in the propagation of the species; and it is this instinct that underwrites all affective experience. For 'all amorousness', Schopenhauer ventures, is 'rooted in the sexual impulse alone' (1966, II: 533).

On these grounds, the job of philosophical thought is to dispel 'l'illusion amoureuse' (Hartmann, 1877, I: 266) as part of the overarching law of what Hartmann termed the 'Unconscious' (or 'Inconscient'), the metaphysical principle governing existence – akin to Schopenhauer's Will, but distinct insofar as it represents a teleological and intelligent process. We might like to think of our inclinations as 'love', but really it is the drive to satisfy our sexual impulse that, Hartmann says, 'fait danser l'univers entier à sa corde de fous' (1877, I: 255). The real trick of such emotion – or 'le rôle pratique de ce sentiment' (1877, I:

268) – is to mask the instinctual mechanism of reproduction, to make us conform with the higher ends of the species. If Schopenhauer and Hartmann agree that love is a ruse, though, they differ in their diagnosis of the reproduction it is to ensure. Where the former envisages the renunciation of the reproductive drive as the only way out of an interminable cycle of suffering, for Hartmann, this drive is necessary for the evolution of the human race towards an advanced state of consciousness. Unlike Schopenhauer's Will, the Hartmannian Unconscious is a form of intelligent design – 'infaillible, omniscient et téléologique, suivant un plan qui se réalise dans l'histoire en évoluant sur la conscience pleine, le perfectionnement de l'espèce' (Hannoosh, in Laforgue, *OC*, III: 1124). Importantly, Laforgue dismisses both Schopenhauer and Hartmann's ethics. If he is sceptical of the latter's optimism – 'l'humanité n'arrivera jamais à la continence unanime qui serait sa libération, c'est un rêve' (*OC*, III: 1132) – he also rejects Schopenhauer's recommendations of abstinence as impossible and obviously hypocritical: 'la suppression du commerce sexuel dans l'humanité est un rêve, un motif à variations humoristiques dont ce farceur ne croyait pas un mot et pratiquait encore moins' (*OC*, III: 1135).

Such a critical spirit of independence characterises his verse too; and if Laforgue takes up Schopenhauer's vision of woman as the embodiment of the will-to-live (or, for Hartmann, of the Unconscious), it is largely with a heavy sense of humour. This beastlet in a bun appears as an unwitting figure of duplicity, hoodwinking man into marriage, and into bed: 'Ô femme, mammifière à chignon, ô fétiche, | On t'absout; c'est un Dieu qui par tes yeux nous triche' ('Complainte des voix sous le figuier boudhique', ll. 47-48, *OC*, I: 552-55). Laforgue's relentless irony is directed at the codes of amorous discourse, which obscure what Hartmann describes unsentimentally as the procreative logic of the Unconscious: 'Si A tombe amoureux de B, cela signifie que B est la moitié la plus propre à compléter A, ou que A engendrera avec B des enfants plus beaux qu'avec tout autre' (Hartmann, 1877, I: 266). In

‘Sur une défunte’ (*Derniers vers*; *OC*, II, 332-33), Laforgue takes Hartmann’s amorous algebra further into the alphabet as part of his reflection on the fundamental arbitrariness of the romantic encounter:

> Si elle avait rencontré seulement
> A, B, C, ou D, au lieu de Moi,
> Elle les eût aimés uniquement!
>
> […]
>
> Elle était née pour chacun d’eux. (ll. 8-10, 14)

Here, the lover’s language of predestination is unhinged from romantic ideals of singularity, as each hypothetical romantic narrative cancels the other out in a potentially endless logic of substitutability: ‘Elle m’aime, *infiniment*! Non, d’occasion ! | Si non *moi*, ce serait *infiniment* un autre!’ (‘Complainte propitiatoire à l’Inconscient’, *Les Complaintes*; ll. 5-6, *OC*, I, 549; Laforgue’s emphasis). What Henri Scepi terms ‘les règles imposées de la grammaire des sentiments’ (2000: 230) fall under Laforgue’s scrutiny, insofar as his own emphatic stress – the signposting of his citational mode – gives an ironic inflection to the lover’s capacity for ‘infinite’ affection.

Laforgue’s disillusioned satire on the specious ideals peddled by the lover’s discourse operates under the aegis of Schopenhauer and Hartmann insofar as it serves to demystify the biological imperatives that determine ‘romantic’ relations. What the poet terms the drive of our ‘incurables organes’ (‘Dimanches’, *Derniers vers*, III; l. 48, *OC*, II: 307) establishes a fundamental struggle for self-gratification, and this produces in turn a pervasive hostility between the sexes, whose courting rituals are made to resemble a set-piece of modern warfare: ‘toilettés à la mode des passants’, men and women line up ‘en bataille rangée’ (‘Grande Complainte de la ville de Paris’, *Les Complaintes*; *OC*, I: 609). In the notes that Beauvoir cites at the head of her conclusion to *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Laforgue reproduces

Schopenhauer's assimilation of woman's powers of seduction to a 'weapon', but it is one employed, he suggests, in an unfair war:

> Non, la femme n'est pas notre frère; par la paresse et la corruption, nous en avons fait un être à part, inconnu, n'ayant d'autre arme que son sexe, ce qui est non seulement la guerre perpétuelle, mais encore une arme pas de bonne guerre – […] des défiances d'éternel petit esclave. (*OC*, III: 1100; cited by Beauvoir, 1976, II: 633)

Laforgue's indictment of woman's lack of solidarity is tempered by his recognition of man's collective guilt; as Beauvoir glosses elsewhere, Laforgue 'rend l'homme aussi coupable que la femme' (1976, I: 306). Complicit in woman's subordination or enslavement, man reaps what he sows, for if woman is forced to make a weapon of her sex, it is, Beauvoir elaborates, a spontaneous response to the situation in which she is placed: 'elle cherche son salut dans la voie qui lui a été imposée, celle de la passivité' (1976, II: 636). Where social and economic power is concentrated in the hands of men, women are bound to seek their survival via the acquired prestige of their relationship with them. What Laforgue gestures towards here is, then, precisely the social and historical conditioning contained in Beauvoir's famous attack on essentialism: 'on ne naît pas femme: on le devient' (1976, II:13) – in Laforgue's terms, 'nous en avons *fait* [de la femme] un être à part' (*OC*, III: 1100).[7]

In tracing out these mutual concerns of philosopher and poet, I do not wish to argue that Beauvoir derives her feminist philosophy from Laforgue, but rather that she finds in him a particularly compelling voice for her claims, one already attuned to the difficult dynamics of intersubjectivity underpinning her own existentialist account of woman's enslavement. In other words, Laforgue already describes the conditions of woman's radical alterity (her status as 'un être à part'), alert to the ways in which man establishes himself as a free subject by subjugating woman: in Beauvoir's terms, 'il est le Sujet, il est l'Absolu: elle est l'Autre' (1976, I: 17). The subject can be posed only in being opposed by an other. That fundamental

factor of woman's concrete condition – what Beauvoir calls 'son être-pour-les-hommes' (1976, I: 235) – is precisely what Laforgue describes in *Derniers vers,* IX ('Oh! qu'une d'elle-même'; *OC*, II: 328), from which the eighteen-year-old Beauvoir had copied out the following lines in her diary (see Beauvoir, 2008: 175):

> Et je sais parfaitement que ma destinée se borne
> (Oh, j'y suis déjà bien habituée!)
> À te suivre jusqu'à ce que tu te retournes,
> Et alors t'exprimer comment tu es!
>
> Vraiment je ne songe pas au reste; j'attendrai
> Dans l'attendrissement de ma vie faite exprès. (ll. 23-28)

The Laforguian speaker expresses the female condition here in an act of ventriloquism that combines knowing irony with an ongoing complicity; the female voice is fully aware of, even accustomed to, the limits of her fate, that is, her preordained task of projecting man's image of himself. Laforgue's woman effectively inhabits the sphere of what Beauvoir calls 'immanence', the realm of passivity and repetition that men compel women to occupy, and which is opposed to 'transcendence' – man's reaching out into the future towards other freely chosen projects.[8] Where woman's transcendence is destined to be overshadowed, Beauvoir argues, by the transcendence of another ego that is sovereign, she risks denying her freedom of choice. Here the Laforguian female's obedient submission to the male project of self-creation bears out just such a sense of *mauvaise foi*: 'j'attendrai | Dans l'attendrissement de *ma vie faite exprès*.' Between the partially recapitulative 'attendrai' and 'attendrissement' – the future of patient passivity and the demonstration of undivided tenderness – Laforgue has his *amoureuse* obligingly set out the terms of her own emotional servitude.

Laforgue effectively describes, then, the structures of idealisation in which woman is imprisoned, and in which she is necessarily complicit. Indeed, it is this that Beauvoir remarks on in Laforgue's writing: 'dans toute son œuvre il exprime sa rancœur contre une

mystification dont il rend l'homme aussi coupable que la femme' (1976, I: 306). What Naomi Schor terms – with reference to Beauvoir's philosophy – women's 'compensatory tendency to situate themselves on the side of the Ideal' (1993: 32) is figured by Laforgue too as the strategy of the disenfranchised; woman's refuge in a false ideal ('Idéal sans vérité') is the result of her being condemned to experience only 'la facticité contingente de la vie' (Beauvoir, 1976, I: 306 and II: 504). In 'Pétition' (*Derniers vers*; *OC*, II: 314), the Laforguian speaker wonders how these incarcerated angels of the hearth might be brought down from their high ground:

> Ô historiques esclaves!
> Oh! leur petite chambre!
> Qu'on peut les en faire descendre
> Vers d'autres étages,
> Vers les plus frelatées des caves,
> Vers les moins ange-gardien des ménages!
>
> […]
>
> Mon Dieu, que l'Idéal
> La dépouillât de ce rôle d'ange!
> Qu'elle adoptât l'Homme comme égal!
> Oh, que ses yeux ne parlent plus d'Idéal,
> Mais simplement d'humains échanges (ll. 37-42, 49-53)

The longed-for possibility of equality, of 'humains échanges', between the sexes depends on prising the female subject out of those angelic 'ménages' she inhabits – household chores in an emotional and material sense. Woman performs her celestial 'role' as part of her duplicitous enslavement to the Hartmannian Unconscious, for the Ideal that she deploys is, paradoxically, underwritten by the instinctual mechanisms of sexual reproduction, entirely complicit, even synonymous, with the procreative logic of Hartmann's life-process. If the Laforguian female has truck with the ethereal, then, it only serves to bind her more tightly to the terrestrial world she inhabits. She remains mired in a state of Beauvoirian immanence, her

desperate exclamation elsewhere – 'Ô mois, ô linges, ô repas!' ('Complainte des pianos qu'on entend dans les quartiers aisés', *Les Complaintes*; l. 60, *OC*: I, 558) – giving voice to a profound exasperation with the iterative cycles of femininity and domestic labour.

It is, of course, this fundamentally repetitive anatomical female destiny that Beauvoir seizes on in *Le Deuxième Sexe*: 'son malheur, c'est d'avoir été biologiquement vouée à répéter la Vie' (1976: I, 116).[9] In *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* (1958), meanwhile, Beauvoir's autobiographical reflections on woman's reproductive fate are captured precisely in a favourite Laforguian metaphor, the ritornello, which is associated first and foremost with his tormented female piano-player: 'avoir des enfants, qui à leur tour auraient des enfants, c'était rabâcher à l'infini la même ennuyeuse ritournelle' (1958: 185). As one of twelve children, Jules must have been acutely aware of the iterativity of the maternal fate; his mother's death, following the birth of her twelfth child, is registered in the opening poem of *Des Fleurs* ('Avertissement'): 'J'avais presque pas connu ma mère' (l. 3, *OC*, II: 147). Such anxieties about the stakes of consummation are played out in the novella, 'Lohengrin, fils de Parsifal' (*Moralités légendaires*), where Laforgue has his eponymous hero identify Elsa's slim 'anti-maternal' hips as a sign of female duplicity; they fail to disclose, he says, the reproductive imperative that lies at the end of the line: '[tu marches] comme profitant de ta légèreté d'entr'acte, avant que ça recommence' (*OC*, II: 427).[10] The Laforguian male is bound to confront in his female counterpart the fact of his own eternally embodied fate, or what Beauvoir terms 'l'image figée de sa destinée animale' (1976: I, 276).

Laforguian Sexciprocity

Laforgue's diagnosis of woman's circumscribed destiny wavers in such ways between expressions of sympathy and profound mistrust. But for all he returns to a Schopenhauerian vision of woman's attachment to Nature, his writing also bears out, as in 'Pétition', a longing for change, a need – and in this he is closest to Beauvoir – to alter those prevailing structures of sexual relations that leave men and women estranged from one another. Indeed, there emerges across both Laforgue's verse and notes the Beauvoirian fantasy of a new sort of intersubjectivity, which involves the mutual recognition of the other as a free acting subject. The interminable struggle of the individual consciousness for sovereignty through subordination – 'l'implacable dialectique du maître et de l'esclave' (1976: I, 241) – can be overcome, Beauvoir claims, 'par la libre reconnaissance de chaque individu en l'autre, chacun posant à la fois soi et l'autre comme objet et comme sujet dans un mouvement réciproque' (1976: I, 240). Fundamental to Laforgue's own vision of transformed relations between the sexes is just such an ethics of reciprocity – or rather what he calls, with typical playfulness, sexciprocity: 'tu es la femme, et moi l'homme[,] soyons heureux sexciproquement' (*OC*, III: 1160). In one sense, the poet's neologism bears out formally the faculty of invention that these new relations will require – and this in a way which already anticipates Beauvoir's utopian ideal of reconfigured sexual and emotional relationships: 'entre les sexes naîtront de nouvelles relations charnelles et affectives dont nous n'avons pas idée' (1976, II: 651). Indeed, Beauvoir specifically takes up Laforgue's future-oriented vision in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, where she cites the poet's injunction to his fellow men to establish women as equals rather than idols: 'il faut […] en faire [des femmes] véritablement nos compagnes égales, nos amies intimes, des associées d'ici-bas, les habiller autrement, leur couper les cheveux, leur tout dire' (*OC*, III: 1101; cited by Beauvoir, 1976, I: 405). If Laforgue's 'new woman' – a sort of short-haired confidante! – is to exist, this depends, then, not only on man breaking with those structures of idealisation or mythification in which he

holds her, but also on establishing a new relationship of honest intimacy – one which might look something like friendship. This, for Beauvoir, would represent the highest form of reciprocity to which we can aspire:

> l'amitié, la générosité, qui réalisent concrètement cette reconnaissance des libertés, ne sont pas des vertus faciles; elles sont assurément le plus haut accomplissement de l'homme, c'est par là qu'il se trouve dans sa vérité. (1976: I, 240)

For Laforgue, the lure of the heterosocial surfaces throughout his verse and notes as a way out of the false role-playing that underpins the rites of sexual and sentimental seduction. His eternally suspicious speaker is often led to reproduce Hartmann's diagnosis of woman's congenital inability to sustain genuine friendship; this 'fausse sœur' ('Complainte des voix sous le figuier boudhique', l. 55) could always be found guilty of peddling other agendas.[11] But Laforgue does fantasise of treating woman *fraternally*, and thus of a new model of partnership that might bring about the deflation of sexual difference. In notes that Beauvoir partially cites, Laforgue expresses his frustration with man's unwillingness to treat woman as a *working* partner:

> La femme est un être vaillant, travailleur, un associé, etc. Nous ne devrions nous occuper d'elle autrement que de nos frères, qu'à certains moments, une 1/2 heure, parce qu'elle a un autre sexe, – pas avant, pas après – travail, association – Eh bien non, comme on l'a laissée dans l'esclavage, la paresse, sans autre occupation et arme que son sexe, elle l'a hypertrophié […]. Nous supportons tout le travail de la planète depuis l'histoire. Ce travail nécessairement est stupide et boite parce que la femme n'y prend pas part – avec la Femme nous avons jusqu'ici joué à la poupée – eh bien voilà trop longtemps que ça dure. (*OC*, III: 1105-06; partially cited by Beauvoir, 1976, I: 406)

However tongue-in-cheek, the poet's recommendation that man's sexual impulse be sidelined to a notional daily half an hour is posed as a means of reasserting woman's status as an agent. For where she has been condemned by man to idleness – that primary form of Beauvoirian immanence – woman has overdeveloped her only remaining occupation: 'elle a hypertrophié

[son sexe]'. Her claim to autonomy would, then, have to be worked out through her access to the (historical) labour process that Laforgue describes; she must become an 'associée' – man's full co-worker in every domain, not least the intimate. Indeed, as Nick White puts it, with reference to Maupassant's contemporaneous *Bel-Ami* (1885) – a novel Laforgue admired: 'the language of association, with its political as well as financial overtones' could be 'transposed to the conjugal realm' with some degree of idealism (2011: 384).[12] Here White has in mind Madeleine Forestier's view of marriage as a contract between equals – 'une association' rather than 'une chaîne' (Maupassant, 2008: 208).

If Maupassant registers the importance that discourses of 'association' acquired in the wake of the 1884 Loi Naquet, which reestablished divorce in France, the wider potential of such rhetoric continued to be exploited to political ends in much fin-de-siècle anarchist and socialist writing. In *La Société mourante et l'anarchie* (1893), Jean Grave took to task the subordination of married women in precisely these terms, 'la femme ayant été jusqu'ici considérée comme inférieure, et plutôt comme une propriété que comme un associé' (1893: 72). Those of Laforgue's notes on women (the above passage included) that were published posthumously by Félix Fénéon in the *Revue anarchiste*, and in the same year as Grave's study, were set in this context of radical politics, however much the poet's humour and evasiveness ultimately inhibit any sense of political engagement. In Laforgue's hands, the vision of woman as an 'associée' seems, more precisely, to respond to the need to demystify and *deidealise* erotic relations. He imagines, in other words, introducing an easiness, or simplicity, into the heterosexual encounter, already hinted at in the opening lines of 'Pétition' – there under the guise of prostitution: 'Avec toutes, l'amour s'échange | Simple et sans foi comme un bonjour' (ll. 5-6). Elsewhere, it is, as we shall see below, the gesture of the handshake – a prime symbol of association – that comes to represent the straightforward commerce of sentimental and sexual relations about which the Laforguian speaker fantasises:

‘Se serrer la main sans affaires! | Selon les cœurs, selon les corps’ (‘Célibat, célibat, tout n’est que célibat’, *Des Fleurs*; ll. 19-20, *OC*, II: 188).

Such moments of longing, however briefly glimpsed, hint at the form that Laforguian ‘sexciprocity’ might take. Indeed, the *mot-valise* itself provides a particular meeting-point of the formal and the erotic, representing, as Laforgue put it, an impossible *coupling* of words: in a letter to Gustave Kahn (16 December 1884), he insisted on the erotic character of this word-play as ‘cet accouplement de mots qui n’ont qu’une harmonie de rêve mais font dans la réalité des couples impossibles’ (*OC*, II: 720). What binds two words together in such instances is, as Clive Scott puts it in the present issue, an ‘acoustic kinship’ or reciprocity; and this can be seen to extend to characterise Laforgue’s *vers libre* more widely, where ‘rhyme has a psycho-associative rather than a structural value’. That such interest in *fraternal*, or associative, lexical relations might, as Scott registers, be connected to the poet’s reflections on relations between the sexes bears further reflection, not least insofar as it speaks to the alignment of the sexual and the formal already at work in many of Laforgue’s neologisms: ‘violuptés à vif’ (‘Complainte des nostalgies préhistoriques’, *Les Complaintes*; , l. 10, *OC*, I: 573), ‘vendanges sexciproques’ (‘Complainte à Notre-Dame des Soirs’, *Les Complaintes*; l. 18, *OC*, I: 551), ‘hontes sangsuelles’ (variant of l. 56, ‘Complainte des voix sous le figuier boudhique’)... As Henri Scepi and Jean-Pierre Bertrand argue, the Laforguian *mot-valise* – or to recall Laforgue’s terms, these ‘increvables membranes hymen’ (*OC*, II: 720) – brings about a sexualised union of words that is strictly non-reproductive: ‘l’accouplement ne donne pas naissance à un être constitué et viable; il rend manifeste un “rêve”, qui est l’envers de la langue’ (2012: 135). Or in Yvan Leclerc’s words, Laforgue produces ‘deux mots qui ne peuvent pas en faire un’ (1989: 34). Coupled but not synthetic, they open up instead a bracket – ‘une *parenthèse*’ (*OC*, II: 720) – that expands by a perpetual process of *dédoublement*.

If it is possible to align Laforgue's formal innovation with his vision of sexual politics, it is, then, above all, in terms of an ongoing pursuit of new *relationships*, both sexual and semantic, that might be rooted in different kinds of compatibility. In *Derniers vers*, it is the figure of the 'impossible couple' – to transpose Laforgue's account of his wordplay – that haunts the poet's imagination. A utopian fantasy of symmetry and synchronicity between the sexes resurfaces throughout, whether as the tender image of collaborative communion – 'Oh, simplement d'infinis échanges | A la fin de journées | A quatre bras moissonnées' ('Pétition'; ll. 57-59) – or as the imagined scenario of a simultaneous declaration, which Scepi terms 'le thème de la coïncidence immédiate, "le tomber-ensemble-à-genoux"' (2000: 248). Such prospects of a happy intersubjectivity give another inflection to the earlier leitmotiv of *Les Complaintes*: 'Aimer, être aimé!' ('Complainte-Litanies de mon Sacré-Cœur', l. 24, *OC*, I: 612-13). But Laforgue is, as Scepi suggests, already mining away at these model images of reciprocity: 'l'utopie de la fraternité amoureuse [...] fait l'objet d'un retournement ironique radical, qui équivaut à une négation sans appel' (2000: 247). The Laforguian speaker's ardent desire for absolute reciprocity in love only returns him to the 'blocus sentimental' ('L'Hiver qui vient', *Derniers vers*; l. 1, *OC*, II: 297) under which the collection unfolds: 'Mais nul n'a voulu faire le premier pas | Voulant trop tomber *ensemble* à genoux' ('Solo de lune', *Derniers vers*; ll. 14-15, *OC*, II: 320; Laforgue's emphasis). Locked into another psychical struggle, the fantasy of synchronicity degenerates into a scene of hesitation that is destined to end in the regret of inaction – regret which is captured in that quintessentially Laforguian tense, the pluperfect subjunctive: 'J'eusse été le modèle des époux. | Comme le frou-frou de ta robe est le modèle des frou-frou' (ll. 106-07). Just as those gestures of reciprocal feeling always risk falling into the artful set-piece, so this husband *manqué* persists in fantasising of an *inauthentic* destiny, an accomplished form of role-play that would reduce him to the most frivolous synecdoche. Ultimately, the lure of bad faith hangs over Laforgue's meditations on

love, each amorous gesture threatening to harden into posture, to cement lovers in an estranged form of coupledom: 'Des ans vont passer là-dessus, | On s'endurcira chacun pour soi' ('Solo de lune'; ll. 32-33). Before this future – at once feared and desired – the Laforguian speaker hesitates, and beats a retreat into self-irony. In turn, Laforgue's utopian fantasy of an authentic sexual relationship is bound to implode.

Such self-parody is drawn out at length in 'Lohengrin, fils de Parsifal', where the hero's anxious hesitation on his wedding night not only precludes the awaited *passage à l'acte*, but also brings into view his own occasional feminist sympathies. For the novella's hero is a self-styled crusader for the emancipation of women who nonetheless remains unable to escape his own Decadent *idées reçues*, ever suspicious of Elsa's embodied desires. Postponing his feminist mission into the indefinite future, he ascends to the heights of the Schopenhauerian 'Métaphysique de l'Amour' with the following promise: 'Parsifal, mon père, prépare un plan de rachat pour notre petite sœur humaine et si terre-à-terre!...' (*OC*, II: 428). The comically condescending voice of the male feminist betrays the kinds of difficulties involved in elaborating a project for woman's redemption on her behalf; his own detachment, and the meditative freedom in which he takes refuge, become another form of self-deception. For what Laforgue parodies here – and in this he again anticipates Beauvoir – is not only the notion that man's freedom can be conceived of independently from woman's, but also the disavowal of man's own complicity in her terrestrial fate. With Lohengrin's abdication of his own responsibility – he leaves the work of feminism to his father –, Laforgue parodies the kind of ethical *dégagement* that elsewhere appears to undercut his own sympathies. In this respect, his vision of woman's condition always operates at one remove from the committed ends to which Beauvoir chose to harness it. But however biting Laforgue's humour, and however implosive his self-irony, his writing still bore out an egalitarian impulse that spoke to Beauvoir's agendas. For both, as we have seen, the state of

relations between the sexes is implicated in the widest ethical and philosophical questions about human freedom. And integral to both their utopian visions is the possibility of reciprocal intersubjectivity. At the end of the first volume of *Le Deuxième Sexe*, it is Laforgue's call for fraternal relations that Beauvoir employs to articulate her own ardent wishes: 'Ô jeunes filles, quand serez-vous nos frères, nos frères intimes sans arrière-pensée d'exploitation? quand nous donnerons-nous la vraie poignée de main?' (1976, I: 408; see Laforgue, *OC*, III: 1100). The future of sexual politics was to rest on solidarity, epitomised by that most unsentimental (and quintessentially British) of exchanges, the handshake – and it is to this 'poignée de main' that we shall turn by way of conclusion.[13]

The Handshake

In a letter to Charles Henry of August 1882, Laforgue declared: 'Vous savez qu'il y a trois sexes: l'homme, la femme, l'Anglaise' (*OC*, I: 794). This third term in the gender binary – the English woman – was, he wrote elsewhere, the only 'race de femme' that he could not mentally undress (*OC*, III: 1116).[14] Even before he met the diminutive English teacher, Leah Lee, whom he would eventually marry in December 1886, Laforgue had an English woman in mind as perhaps the only way out of an intolerable structure of sexual difference. 'Le type de l'adorable, de l'aimée unique, pour moi est par ex. l'anglaise [...]', he wrote, 'Elle n'a pas pour moi d'organes sexuels, je n'y songe pas' (*OC*, III: 960-61).[15] As for Leah, this reserved, androgynous, short-haired 'petit personnage', as he liked to call her, seemed to body forth something of the fraternal companionship he had written about.[16] But the prospect of marriage was a source of anxious deliberation. Jules had come close to asking Leah to marry him in spring that year; and though he got cold feet, wedlock seemed nonetheless inevitable:

‘En tout cas je sens bien que le mariage est une question qui m’attend fatalement et que ce n’est plus qu’une affaire de temps’, he confided to his sister Marie (*OC*, II: 832). He eventually proposed to Leah one September evening, later describing the scene, again to his sister:

> Et avant-hier en la raccompagnant, je lui ai tout dit. Je ne lui ai pas dit “je vous aime”. Je lui ai balbutié des tas de choses que je ne me rappelle plus […]. Je lui ai demandé avec des tas de circonlocutions si elle voudrait passer sa vie avec moi (je me rappelle ma voix étranglée et mes larmes dans les yeux) et je ne lui ai pas donné le temps de me répondre, je me suis lancé dans des protestations. Elle a dit oui avec un regard extraordinaire. Je ne lui ai pas laissé dire qu’elle m’aimait mais qu’elle eût confiance en mon dévouement, etc., etc... Je ne me rappelle plus. Je la raccompagnai et nous nous donnâmes une solide poignée de main sans trop nous regarder en face. (*OC*, II: 873)

Sealed with a handshake, this touching, if faintly awkward and understated, proposal self-consciously maintains a critical distance from the language and gestures of romance; endlessly displaced by circumlocution, the definitive declaration of love is left unspoken, bracketed off as citation, just as it is in the opening line of ‘Dimanches’ (*Derniers vers*, III; *OC*, II: 306): ‘Bref, j’allais me donner d’un “Je vous aime”’... If Laforgue were to take the plunge of which his indecisive poetic persona remained incapable, it seemed this engagement would have to be established as a contract between equals, negotiated with honesty. But for the poet eternally suspicious of such commitments, marriage was a veritable test of his ethics. After proposing, he described his exhilaration in Hartmannian terms as a matter of collaborating with the Unconscious, ‘l’ivresse d’avoir obéi à l’Inconscient, à la volonté du destin’ (*OC*, II: 882).

Like Laforgue, the eighteen year-old Beauvoir too felt marriage loomed, inevitably, at the end of the line, writing of her relationship with Jacques: ‘je sens que je ne peux pas résister, que je m’achemine fatalement vers ce terme... et j’aurais tant voulu m’attarder dans une imprécise affection’ (2008: 139). If she did not marry Jacques, she felt, she would not

marry anybody (2008: 140) – and she remained, of course, true to her word. What she desired instead was to preserve 'la grande douceur de l'amitié présente' (2008: 139), a friendship captured in one Laforguian gesture – a handshake: 'Penser que toute ma vie je trouverai aux heures dures une telle poignée de main…' (2008: 219). If I have chosen to begin and end this article on a biographical note, it is because the line between Beauvoir and Laforgue travels via the intimate as much as the philosophical. We have seen how Laforgue's account of the female condition prefigures the terms of Beauvoir's existentialist thought, occasionally lending her the language in which to trace out her own feminist critique and aspirations. But Beauvoir's reading of Laforgue was also, importantly, a personal one; and what she extracted from his writing inflected her own private dilemmas. What Laforgue described – and perhaps what moved Beauvoir in turn – was the difficulty of reconciling philosophy with the life of the emotions, or, in the terms of the poet's dilemma, of knowing what illusions love entails but feeling it anyway.

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[1] Later, in her autobiographical *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* (1958), Beauvoir recalled: 'Sur les quais de la Seine, à travers mes sanglots, je me berçais avec des vers de Laforgue' (303).
[2] The poet and essayist Robert Champigny determines in Laforgue's writing many of the intellectual concerns, and much of the philosophical vocabulary, that Sartre would develop: 'the existentialism of Laforgue is not latent; it is fully born and heralds, in its very terminology, the modern, non-religious existentialism whose best-known representatives are Heidegger and Sartre' (1952: 66). Champigny sees in Laforgue's writing, however, a different ethical intervention to Sartre's, an existentialism founded on the sort of 'perpetual "dégagement"' that the philosopher's own future-bound 'social ethics' could not accommodate (73).
[3] For details of Laforgue's philosophical reading, see Michèle Hannoosh in Laforgue, *OC*: III: 1123-26.
[4] Bourdeau's collection, published by Félix Alcan, had already reached its sixteenth edition by the turn of the century.
[5] Laforgue refers explicitly to this chapter of Schopenhauer's *World as Will and Representation* in his novella 'Lohengrin, ou le fils de Parsifal' of the *Moralités légendaires* (1887): 'voici que l'oreiller, changé en cygne, éploya ses ailes impérieuses et, chevauché du jeune Lohengrin, s'enleva [...] vers les altitudes de la Métaphysique de l'Amour' (*OC*, II: 428-29). Hartmann engages with Schopenhauer's 'Metaphysics of Sexual Love' in part 2, chapter 2 (1877); and elsewhere, Schopenhauer's views on women and sexual love are broached, for instance, by Caro (1878; chapter 4) and Challemel-Lacour (1870: 311-12). Caro writes that: 'C'est à la passion de l'amour que le pessimisme fait la guerre la plus acharnée. On dirait que c'est le duel à mort entre Schopenhauer et les femmes qui sont les intermédiaires de l'insigne duperie dont l'homme est le jouet' (1878: 142).
[6] Beauvoir reproduces a selection of extracts from Schopenhauer in her adolescent diaries (see, for instance, 2008: 339-41), and she refers to his vision of the Will in *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1976, I: 272).
[7] This is a point made in passing by Dottin-Orsini, but left undeveloped (see Laforgue, *OC*, III: 1073).
[8] In her Introduction to *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Beauvoir describes the latter in the following terms: 'Tout sujet se pose concrètement à travers des projets comme une transcendance; [...] il n'y a d'autre justification de l'existence présente que son expansion vers un avenir indéfiniment ouvert' (1976, I: 33).
[9] In *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*, Beauvoir reflected on the repetitive domestic chores that she imagined would define her future as a married woman: 'chaque jour, le déjeuner, le dîner; chaque jour la vaisselle; ces heures indéfiniment recommencées et qui ne mènent nulle part: vivrais-je ainsi?' (1958: 138).
[10] In her diary, Beauvoir noted: 'Les *Moralités légendaires* m'ont parfois choquée et parfois ravie. Pas le temps, hélas! de les étudier de près. Je note que j'adore *Pan et la Syrinx*. J'aime bien *Hamlet* et *Persée et Andromède*, mais sans comparaison. Mais c'est un livre triste, triste, qui grimace souvent pour ne pas pleurer, ce qui est parfois affreux, parfois sublime' (2008: 166).
[11] According to Hartmann, 'les femmes en général sont incapables de toute pure et vraie amitié, aussi bien avec les hommes qu'entre elles' (1877, I: 253).
[12] In a letter to Théophile Ysaÿe of July 1885, Laforgue declared his admiration for Maupassant's fiction, however much he was suspicious of the author's commercial success: 'Je sais qu'en quatre ans je pourrais faire fortune si je voulais écrire des romans à la Guy de Maupassant. *Bel-Ami* est d'un maître, mais ce n'est pas de l'art pur' (*OC*, II: 774).
[13] It is clear from Laforgue's comment, in a letter to his sister Marie (8 September 1886), that he considered the handshake to be a characteristically English gesture: '[Leah] étudiait la peinture et peu à peu je lui ai apporté des gravures et puis des livres [...]. Tout cela très simplement, sans même la poignée de main si naturelle pourtant chez les Anglais' (*OC*, II: 873). According to Herman Roodenburg, 'To the French in the first half of the nineteenth century the handshake was something new, a gesture that recently had come across the Channel' (1991: 177). That the handshake was still regarded in France, in the second half of the century, as an English custom is demonstrated by Emma Bovary's response – cited by Roodenburg – to Léon's farewell gesture: 'A l'anglaise donc'.
[14] Leclerc describes the poet's fascination with the gender-neutral *anglaise* as 'la rencontre laforguienne d'un troisième sexe' (1989: 35).
[15] Laforgue's characterisation of the English woman as sexless was not wholly unusual. According to Robert and Isabelle Tombs, British women were characterized by the French as 'unfeminine', as well as 'sincere, modest, religious, serious-minded and independent; and conversely, as naïve, prudish, unsociable, inelegant, indecorous and masculine' (2006: 450). In the early decades of the nineteenth century, two French women writers characterised romantic relations between British men and women in a positive light. In *De la littérature* (1800), Madame de Staël described the domestic affection and harmony that she perceived across the Channel: 'les rapports des hommes avec les femmes se multiplient à l'infini par la sensibilité et la délicatesse' (243). Meanwhile, in *Olivier ou le Secret* (written between 1821-23; published in 1971), Madame de Duras has the

Comte de Sancerre describe, from England, the domestic lot of women and their status as companions, and friends: 'Nulle part les femmes ne sont plus heureuses, car nulle part elles ne sont mieux aimées, [...] une femme est la compagne, l'amie qu'on a choisie pour s'aider à supporter les maux de la vie' (2007: 200). I am grateful to Stacie Allen for drawing my attention to these connections.

[16] See, for instance, Laforgue's letter to his sister Marie, written 8 September 1886: 'C'est un petit personnage impossible à décrire. Elle est grande comme toi et comme moi, mais très maigre et très anglaise surtout' (*OC*, II: 874).